Don't Drop That Notebook

Damage Control For Your Portable Computer

Bad things can happen to good notebook computers. Accidents can take many forms, from slippery fingers that drop the computer to sticky liquids that spill on the keyboard. An unexpected bump can shatter the screen, crash the hard drive, or damage an add-on card.

Here are some all-too-common notebook hardware problems, along with tips for dealing with each one. You can fix some of these problems yourself. Others require a trip to a computer repair specialist. And sadly, some accidents simply spell early retirement for a laptop.

Shattered LCD

It is a sound that you may never forget: the sickening crunch an LCD (liquid-crystal display) screen makes when it shatters. It's also a sound your wallet won't soon forget: Replacing an LCD screen means a trip to the repair shop for expensive screen-replacement surgery.

You could buy a replacement screen from an online parts source, but installing it can be very, very tricky. Taking a laptop apart is much easier than putting it back together. Unless you have experience as both a PC hardware builder and brain surgeon, leave this fix to the experts.

Drenched Keyboard

Computers and liquids do not mix, but that doesn't stop us all from keeping a hot cup of coffee, cola, or another beverage of choice within reach of the keyboard at all times. When a clumsy arm knocks that drink into your laptop's keyboard, you're in trouble, but the prognosis may not be bleak.

Quickly unplug the laptop and keep the power cord from getting wet. Shut down the computer, turn it upside down and give it a gentle shake to let the liquid trickle out. If available, use a hairdryer, set to low heat, to blow air into the keyboard. You may want to leave the laptop in the sun or in another warm (not hot) spot to let it dry. Leave it to dry for a day or two to let the liquid evaporate before you turn the computer on again. With a bit of luck, the only side-effect will be a sticky keyboard, which you can remedy with a damp rag while the computer is off.

Once it has had time to thoroughly dry, start the computer. If the machine runs but some or all of the keyboard keys don't work, you may have to replace the keyboard. This may be something you can do yourself with a screwdriver, but some models will require you to take it in for repair. Check the laptop's manual or manufacturer's Web site for information on removing and replacing the keyboard.

If the laptop was seriously drenched, it's possible that hardware other than the keyboard was affected. In this case, there's no telling what damage might have been done. Take it to a repair shop for a damage assessment.

Damaged Wireless Card

Wireless Internet access is a necessity for many people, and a wireless card is the easiest way to add the capability to laptops that don't have built-in Wi-Fi. These cards can cause a problem because they stick out from the laptop. A PC card or USB (Universal Serial Bus) wireless device may jut out a couple of inches from your laptop, where it could be crushed, slammed against a wall, or otherwise end up in harm's way.

When a wireless card is damaged, there's no practical way to repair it yourself, and, most likely, a repair shop won't be able to do it either. (And if it can, it could cost more than a new card.) The components in a wireless card are tiny and often proprietary. Your only option is to throw it away and buy a new one.

If you suspect that a card is damaged (perhaps it was bent in the laptop bag or part of the casing has cracked, for instance) don't plug it into the computer to test it. It could get jammed in there or short out the motherboard, causing irreparable damage to the computer. The safest option is to throw the card away and replace it.

Hard Drive Failure

A laptop's hard drive is its most sensitive part; those whirring discs don't like to be jostled, especially when the computer is reading or writing data. A strong jolt at the wrong time can be a death blow to any hard drive, but portability makes notebooks more likely candidates for drive damage.

Treat your laptop's hard drive with care. Put your computer to sleep or shut it down before you carry it from place to place. This will "park" the hard drive's heads, ensuring that they won't damage data if they're severely jarred.

Remember that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, so back up the important information on your laptop regularly. Many laptops have a built-in CD burner, which is a convenient way to make a backup. Or, copy your vital documents over a network to your desktop PC.

If your laptop's hard drive stops working or doesn't seem to work right after being dropped or jolted, your first step should be to use a data-recovery application such as Stellar Phoenix ($79; www.stellarinfo.com) or RecoverSoft ($129; www.data-recovery-software.com). If you or a friend has some experience with Linux, you can try using R.I.P. (Recovery Is Possible; free; www.tux.org/pub/people/kent-robotti/looplinux/rip), a version of Linux that can be booted from CD to recover your Windows system. R.I.P. is free but can be trickier to use than a commercial program.

If recovery software doesn't help but the drive contains information that you absolutely must retrieve, you may want to turn to a company that specializes in media recovery. DriveSavers (www.drivesavers.com) can retrieve data from drives that have been battered and burned, but recovery can cost hundreds of dollars.

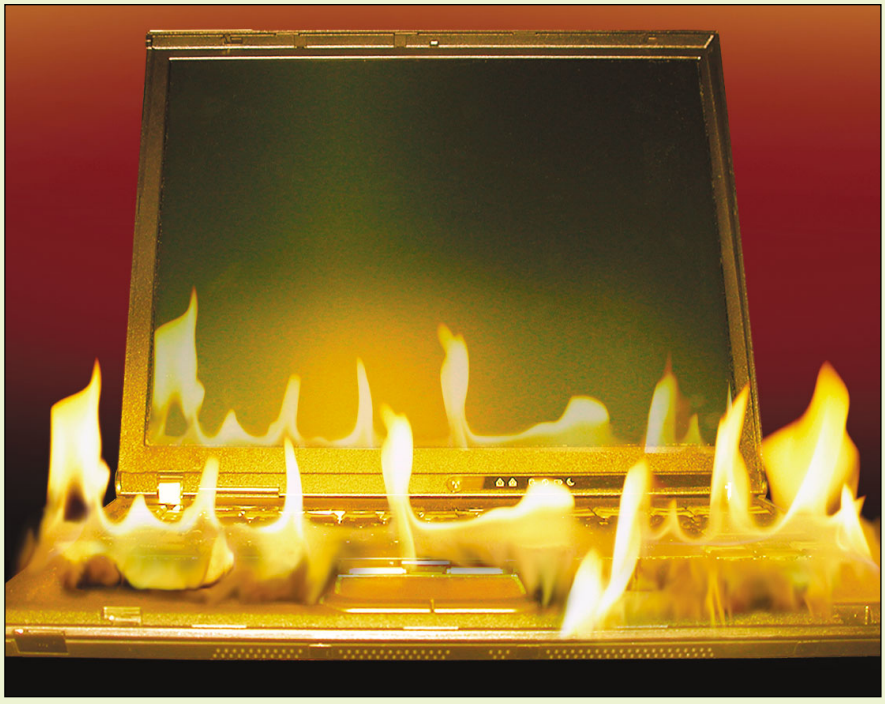
After you've recovered the data (or if you don't need to because you have a recent backup), you'll need to install a new hard drive. The difficulty of that chore depends on the model of your laptop; some drives are replaceable with 10 minutes and a screwdriver. For many models, though, you should take the computer to a repair shop to have a new drive installed.

Cracked Case

You're checking email in the neighborhood coffee shop with the laptop plugged in to recharge, when a passerby gets tangled in the power cord, pulling the laptop from the table onto the floor. You assess the damage: Although it still runs, there's an unsightly crack in the computer's case.

You can take it to a repair shop; your best bet is an authorized service center for your case's particular brand that can get system-specific replacement parts, such as base assemblies, palm rests, and LCD covers. It may take them some time to locate the correct part. Although the replacement part might be cheap, the labor charge to install it could make the cost skyrocket.

Depending on the part, you may be able to replace it yourself. Online sellers, such as LaptopParts.com, sell replacement laptop plastics and subassemblies for major laptop brands that you (or perhaps a hardware-minded friend) may be able to install yourself. Also, contact the manufacturer's customer support to find out if it can fix the problem or sell you a replacement component.



If those options don't work out, you could just cover the crack with duct tape. That will serve as a permanent reminder to keep the power cable away from foot traffic.

Baked In The Sun

You leave the laptop in the trunk for a couple of hours on a foggy day. But the couple of hours stretches into five, and the sun unexpectedly comes out. When you return, the laptop is warped like an old phonograph record. If the case has warped badly enough, the laptop might not close, and the battery might not fit into its slot. In addition, intense heat can ruin the LCD screen and melt internal components.

All you can do is take the poor victim home and plug it in. Even if the case is horribly deformed, it may boot up and run, at least long enough for you to move your data to another computer. Barring use of a time machine, there's no undoing this damage. It's time to shop for a new notebook.

It Was Here A Minute Ago

Perhaps the worst—and among the most common—fate for a notebook computer is when the machine itself is stolen. Not only have you lost an expensive item and your valuable data, but someone else has access to that data. Aside from informing the police, there isn't much you can do after the fact.

You can add the computer's serial number to the Stolen Computer Registry (www.stolencomputers.org), a database of missing PCs, and hope that a pawn shop owner or potential buyer checks the registry. It's a long shot, but worth a try.

By installing tracking software on the machine before it is stolen, you boost the chances that you'll get it back. Pal PC Tracker (www.pctracker.net), zTrace (www.ztrace.com), CompuTrace (www.absolute.com), and similar software can secretly send information about a stolen computer's location whenever it is connected to the Internet. The police may be able to use that information to recover the computer. This software isn't foolproof (it will be wiped out if the hard drive is reformatted) but can greatly increase your chance of being reunited with your computer.

Battery Failure

Even if you take the utmost care of your laptop for years, the battery will eventually give out. Like a marathon runner's knees, years of use will reduce the capacity of every laptop's battery.

You may notice that your battery doesn't hold a charge for as long as it did. A battery that used to run for three hours might be reduced to just two. Eventually, you may see a dramatic drop-off; that battery may suddenly hold just 10 minutes of juice. If this happens to a battery that's under a year old, complain to the manufacturer; it may be covered under a warranty.

Manufacturers typically don't warranty batteries beyond a year, so you're probably on your own. Your only option is to replace that battery. Start with the manufacturer's Web site and online stores that specialize in batteries, such as Laptops For Less (www.laptopbattery.net) or BatteryMart.com. Batteries for older laptops can be hard to find and expensive. At some point, you may decide that it's time to simply use the computer as an always-plugged-in desktop machine.

Don't throw away the old battery. Rechargeable batteries contain toxic chemicals that shouldn't be sent to a landfill. The Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corporation (www.rbrc.org) Web site will tell you where you can take rechargeable batteries in your area for recycling.

Consider Computer Insurance

Compared to the sheltered and sedentary life of desktop PCs, many notebook computers live a nomadic and relatively dangerous lifestyle. You might consider a computer insurance policy from a company such as Safeware (safeware.com). An insurance policy can reimburse you if your notebook is damaged by water or in an accident, stolen, or caught up in other unfortunate situations.

As you tote your notebook from place to place, remember that it could be harmed in the line of duty. So treat your notebook with reasonable care, tote it in a padded carrying case, back up its data regularly, and try to expect the unexpected. PCT

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